





Search < AND > Seek

Now is the time to learn how search engine optimization can increase your bottom line and increase your customer base.

BY BRUCE WRIGHT

During the course of the pandemic, online sales rose at least 50 percent for most flower shops with websites, estimated Dan McManus of TeamFloral, a company that specializes in helping florists grow online business. For some who used a TeamFloral program to improve search engine optimization for their websites, sales rose more than twice that to 119 percent. If you haven't already done so, now just might be the time to learn more about how SEO can increase your bottom line.

SEO: Think Inside "the Box"

Your goal isn't just to have new customers find you through internet search. In the new age of e-commerce, even loyal customers from years past can't necessarily be trusted to remember and return to your website, according to McManus.

"We have some research that says two-thirds of your customers who bought from you last year are not going to make a purchase this year," said McManus. "My theory is that it's just too easy to find a florist online. Who wants to remember the name of a business that you use once a year?" Customers today are in the habit of going to the internet, rather than searching their memory for a florist they have used before. "We've become Google-reliant," McManus said.

Some florists may have given up on SEO, thinking that it's hopeless to compete for search engine rankings with businesses that can afford to pay big bucks, whether for paid ads or for SEO experts. Guess what? That's no longer true.

Florists are among those who benefit from a change in the way Google — still very much the heavyweight when it comes to online search — displays results, since the change is in favor of local businesses. The shift has been gradual over a period of years, said Farbod Shoraka, co-founder and CEO of BloomNation, a service provider to florists and an online portal for flower-buying customers, but it's now entrenched: "Now, when I'm using Google to search a generic term like 'flower delivery,' Google knows where I am located, and it shows me a map of flower shops near me."

On any page of Google search results, the top three listings will be paid ads, clearly indicated as such. Right below the paid ads come three listings known as the "map pack," or "the box." (Below the map pack you see the so-called "organic" listings, an area that Joe Vega, co-founder of Lovingly, a portal and website host for independent flower shops, describes as "the wild, wild West" — anyone can get listed here, but the rules are unclear, and trying to figure them out brings little reward.)

"A few shoppers click on the ad section," McManus explained. "Most go down to the map pack." In fact, something like 60 percent of the traffic goes to one of the three shops in the box. In the case of a search like "florist" or "flower delivery," the box will include only flower shops that are local to the searcher's location.

How local? "It depends on the competition," said McManus. "If you're in Wyoming, you can be 10 or 15 miles away from the searcher and get in the box." If you're in Brooklyn, with a much denser population of both people and florists, you have to be much closer to the searcher.

share. But SEO analysts constantly offer educated guesses. Among the factors presumed to be operative, in order of priority, are: (1) your shop's Google My Business listing, (2) reviews, (3) links (to any other business website that is deemed a "high-authority" site), (4) "citations" (for example, directory listings), and (5) the "personalization" of your site.

Of these factors, Google My Business (GMB) and reviews weigh the most. (Last year, GMB had about a 25 percent influence on rank; this year, it's up to 33 percent, according to McManus.) Together, these two determine just about half of your shop's chances of getting into the box.

allowed and whether services such as curbside pickup or no-contact delivery were offered.

It's up to the business owner, however, to keep this information current on the listing. Active management of the listing finds favor with Google. "Whenever I make that kind of update, I see a lot more people searching my business with Google," reported Ha. "Then, when customers call, they already know what we're doing, and that makes them comfortable with calling us." Of course, she also updates the same information on her website.

Managing reviews may seem more daunting, but the trick is simply to do it, agreed every florist interviewed for this story. "I always answer my reviews, good or bad," said Elizabeth Seiji, AIFD, of Edelweiss Flower Boutique in Santa Monica, California. "If it's bad, state your side. Then let the person reading the reviews decide." After consultation with TeamFloral, Seiji now has reviews posted on the home page of her website, which she believes has helped bring in new customers.

When Fulshear Floral Design got a very negative review that was posted in three different places online, all from the same disgruntled customer, owner Ace Berry replied in all three places, answering negativity with a positive attitude: "Please give us a call, we want to fix this, we want you to be 100 percent happy." Other customers, he noted, were duly impressed.

From Google's point of view, the more reviews, the better: "Three reviews in the last year? Google thinks, this isn't a very exciting business to local consumers," said McManus. "But if you're getting four, five reviews a month, that will definitely push you up in the rankings."

(For more advice on handling reviews, see Digital Strategy, p. 48.)

To Pay or Not to Pay?

There's SEO, and then there's SEM: search engine marketing, which includes SEO, but also any paid strategies that you might use to improve the chances that customers will find you on the web, including Google Ads, with its pay-per-click pricing model.

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—Dan McManus, TeamFloral

Or you have to try much harder to attract Google's attention. Because, while proximity to the searcher is important, Google's algorithm still considers other factors in deciding who gets into the box.

Curious to see how your shop ranks in a typical search? If you check from your own shop location, the proximity factor will bias the search rankings in your favor. You can make a more telling assessment with a scanning tool available on the TeamFloral site ([TeamFloral.com](https://www.teamfloral.com)). Click on the link at the top of the home page that says Local Search Ranking. The tool returns a map that shows your shop's ranking for a searcher at various nearby locations on the map. Anywhere you see a 1, 2 or 3, your listing will appear within the map pack ("the box"). The tool gives any florist (even if you are not a TeamFloral client) three scans for free.

SEO: What You Can Do

Besides proximity, what other factors feed into the ranking algorithms, and how are they weighted? This, of course, is information that Google does not

Fortunately, it's not terribly difficult to tweak these two factors.

If you haven't done this already, type your shop name and "Google My Business" into the search field on Google. A page comes up with your listing. It includes a link, "Manage this listing." The time invested to do so is well worth it. Beyond simply making sure that the basic information in the listing is accurate and consistent with other listings across the internet, you have many options for continually updating it. "Ever since COVID, I have updated my Google My Business listing at least once a week," said Jeanne Ha, AIFD. The owner of Park Florist in Takoma Park, Maryland, counts it as one of the reasons her online sales grew by 200 percent between March and October 2020.

Frequent changes in regulations relating to the pandemic provide good reason to update. Early on, customers faced with uncertainty about the status of various retail businesses learned that they could go to Google to find out whether a business was open, whether its hours had changed, if walk-ins were

If you are doing a good job with SEO, do you still need to consider SEM? Maybe, say the experts. But it's helpful to have a savvy service provider guiding you. Lovingly, for example, manages paid search strategy, at no extra cost, for its member shops who take the option. Services offered by Bloomerang Solutions, a digital marketing agency specializing in floral businesses, include managing Google Ads, Google My Business, and a newer program, Google Guaranteed. "If you make a mistake in your pay-per-clicks, it could cost you thousands of dollars a week," said Bloomerang founder Art Conforti, PFCI.

In the past, the mantra for many retail florists was, "I don't need to advertise. I do my marketing for free through social media." Social media can still be a valuable marketing tool. What it won't do, these days, is boost your ranking on Google. "Three years ago, how active you are on Facebook would have made a difference," said McManus. "Last year, it was down to 2 or 3 percent of the pie; now it's zero."

A big part of that is because Google and Facebook are competitors for advertising. (Same goes for Instagram, which is owned by Facebook.) Florists should also be aware, however, that with the growth in traffic on Facebook, the company has throttled the number of unpaid posts it shares. "It's down to something like 10 percent," said McManus. "So, if you have 500 followers, only 50 of them are going to get your posts."

Should you pay Facebook to help you reach a bigger portion of your current followers? A better bet, said McManus, is to pay Facebook for what is called a lookalike audience. "Upload your customer list to Facebook and tell Facebook to find people that have the same characteristics as these people." Since Facebook knows virtually everything about the people who use it, they can deliver highly qualified prospects. And for now, said McManus, this service is reasonably affordable. 🌿

Bruce Wright is a contributing writer to *Floral Management*.



The banner features the SAF logo (a stylized leaf) and the text "SAF Orlando 2021" in a mix of blue, orange, and white fonts. Below this, it says "September 21-23 | Loews Royal Pacific Resort" and "Reconnect. Recharge. Get Inspired." in a teal box. The background is a scenic view of Orlando at sunset with a fountain in the foreground. The main headline "Join us at SAF's 2021 Annual Convention" is in large white letters. Below that, it lists benefits: "Adapted and reimagined to fit your schedule:", "2 days only • Weekday travel • Reduced registration fee", "Easily accessible, affordable destination • Full compliance with CDC COVID requirements", and "More than a dozen education sessions and workshops", "An all-star line-up of presenters and keynote speakers from inside and outside of the industry", and "SAF Annual Convention favorites: Outstanding Varieties Competition, Sylvia Cup Design Competition, Supplier Expo, SAF's Annual Awards and much more...". A teal circle on the right says "Register now and save \$100!". At the bottom, an orange bar says "See full event details at safnow.org/convention".

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